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ABSTRACT

When elementary and middle level students lack effective problem-solving skills, they may make poor behavior choices in social conflicts, contributing to a negative learning and instructional environment. This action research project evaluated the impact of using social skills instruction to improve students' ability to solve problems related to peer conflict situations. Specific skills taught were listening to each other, articulating their feelings positively, and offering solutions for a "win-win" compromise. Participating in the study were second, fourth, and sixth graders from 3 different rural and suburban schools in three Midwestern cities, a total of 96 students. Students' difficulties in problem solving were documented by means of behavior checklists completed by teachers and student surveys. The 16-week intervention was comprised of 4 components implemented in each classroom setting for 30 minutes weekly: (1) direct teaching of social skills; (2) cooperative learning activities; (3) 3-step peer conflict resolution training; and (4) role playing. Post-intervention findings indicated that the number of I-messages increased and that there were improvements in the students' ability to express their feelings. However, tattling and name calling incidents increased. Decreases were noted in teasing and bullying. Occurrences of physical contact incidents remained the same. (Six appendices include data collection instruments and sample lessons. Contains 57 references.) (KB)

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IMPROVING STUDENTS' ABILITY TO PROBLEM SOLVE THROUGH SOCIAL SKILLS INSTRUCTION

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An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

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ABSTRACT

This report described an approach to improve students' ability to problem solve in peer conflict situations. The targeted population included students in 2nd, 4th and 6th grades from both rural and suburban schools in three different Midwestern cities. The inability of students to problem solve was documented by behavior checklists and student surveys.

Analysis of probable cause data revealed several contributing factors such as inadequate role modeling, various maturational ages, lack of social skill training, and competition were leading to difficulties in problem solving in conflict situations.

A review of the solution strategies suggested by the literature resulted in the following interventions: direct teaching of social skills, cooperative learning activities, three step peer conflict resolution skills and role playing.

The results of the post intervention data revealed and increase in I Messages and the ability of students to express their feelings. Tattling and name calling incidents appeared to increase. A decrease in negative behaviors such as teasing and bullying are evident in post intervention data. However, occurrences of physical contact incidents remained the same.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of Problem

The students of the target classrooms exhibit an inability to problem solve resulting in poor choices in social conflicts, leading to a negative learning and instructional environment. Evidence for the existence of this problem includes anecdotal records, observational checklists and student completed surveys.

Description of Immediate Problem Setting

School A has a population of 329 students consisting of sixth, seventh and eighth grades (1998 Combined School Report Card). The high school and middle school are currently housed in the same building. With increased enrollment, the district plans include two additional elementary buildings and a new high school building.

The racial/ethnic background for the target middle school population is: White 88.4%, Black 1.4%, Hispanic 5.5%, Asian/Pacific Islander 2.1%, Native American 0.2% (1998 Combined School Report Card). The average class size for the targeted grade level 6 is 23.4 students. This class size is comparable to the district class size for sixth grade of 23.4 and the state average class size for sixth grade of 24.3 students.

Attendance, mobility and chronic truancy for the middle school population in the district are defined as follows: attendance 95.5%, student mobility 26.9% and chronic truancy 4.2%. Truancy appears to be a concern at the middle school level. "Chronic truants" are students who are absent from school without valid cause for 10% or more of the past 180 school days.

The state average for chronic truants is reported to be 2.3%, thus showing a significantly higher rate in School A than the state average (1998 Combined School Report Card).

School A is located in a rural community setting. Middle school classrooms are located on the upper level with the high school art and drafting rooms. High school students hold classes on the lower level. The cafeteria and library resource center is shared between both the high school and middle school students, located on the lower level. Despite the fact that administrators and teachers have made every effort to separate middle school and high school students, there is contact throughout the school day between the older and the younger students, which could influence the behavior choices of the targeted population.

According to the 1998 School Report Card, School B has a population of 563 students, which includes kindergarten through fifth grade. There are four sections of each grade level. The racial ethnic background for School B includes: 93% White, 1.4% Black, 1.4% Hispanic and 4.1% Asian/Pacific Islander.

The average class size for the targeted grade level 3 is 20.8 to 23.3 students. This class size is slightly smaller when compared to the district average of 21.4 to 24.4 and the state average of 22.1 to 23.2 students. School B has a 5.3% mobility rate that is well below the district mobility rate of 12.3 %. Ninety six point six percent of these students have perfect attendance.

School B is located in a northwest suburb of a large Midwestern city. Instruction takes place in a one-story building, which currently is undergoing asbestos abatement renovation. The targeted classroom will be without ceiling tiles, carpet and floor tiling for one year. Students will be exposed to ongoing construction through the school year.

The 1998 School Report Card for School C contains the following information. The student population from kindergarten through grade six is 679. The racial ethnic background for School C includes: 61% White; 6% Black; 28.4% Hispanic; and 4.6% Asian/Pacific Islander. The population of School C reflects an increased Hispanic population as compared to the district enrollment.

The average class size for grade level 3 at School C is 25.8 students, (specific numbers for grade level 2 are not included in the School Report Card). These numbers are higher than the district average of 24.9 students and the state average of 23.2 students. Attendance for School C is 95.8%. The mobility rate is 19.1%.

School C opened in August of 1996 in a northwest suburb of a large Midwestern city. The building has a large computer lab, a computerized library and a computer in each classroom and a central video system. This building also serves as a magnet school for the bilingual population. Since 1990, the population of the community has surged 42% (Chicago Tribune Internet). To accommodate this increase in population, four mobile classrooms were added to the school. The surrounding neighborhood continues to grow, resulting in the need for additional classroom space in the very near future.

The student contact minutes, for implementation of social skill interventions and conflict resolution in each classroom setting, is 30 minutes each week, for a duration of 16 weeks. The individual differences in each school site are considered as the interventions are designed. School A is a middle school setting. The target population is the 6th grade level. Students move from room to room for each of their academic core classes. Class periods are 48 minutes each. There are two targeted classrooms in school C. These classrooms will be referred to as C1 and C2.

School B and C1 are both self-contained classrooms. Students remain with the classroom teacher for the majority of the day. School C2 is a physical education class, where the teacher has contact with the targeted students for 40 minutes per week.

Description of Surrounding Community

The school district, which encompasses school A, is located in a northeastern section of the state, approximately 59 miles northwest of a large Midwestern city. The district enrollment is 2,041 students in grades K-12; compared to School B's enrollment of 13,908 students and School C's enrollment of 34,912 students. These are significant variations in enrollment numbers between neighboring districts. While School A is located in primarily an agricultural community, recent purchases of land by housing developers promise to dramatically expand residential areas. Several newly developed corporate projects make this school district a prime candidate for rapid economic expansion. This particular county is the fastest growing county in the state and land developers have plans for home construction that will increase enrollment in the district by more than 5,000 students. A timeline for this development depends on market demands. Most estimates call for enrollment to double every two to five years.

School A has a median family income of $64,172, according to the Homefair web site. The semi-rural lifestyle of this area consists mostly of blue-collar workers. Twenty nine percent have a high school diploma and 16% have a bachelor's degree. Residential racial population includes: 90.7% White, 1.4% Black, 5.5% Hispanic, 2.1% Asian/Pacific Islander and 0.2% Native American. Low income students make up 3.6% of the district's population with 4.0% in the middle school population. Instructional expenditure per pupil for School A is $2,764 district wide. The pupil-teacher ratio for this site is 18.3:1.

School B's district is located 30 miles west of a large Midwestern city. This district serves elementary, middle and high school students. It has 13 grade schools, 4 middle schools and 2 high schools. Ninety three percent of the elementary schools performed at or above the state goals in five areas: reading, math, writing, science and social studies.

School B is in an upper middle class community consisting of predominantly white collar workers; with a median housing price of $179,000 and a median family income of $78,000, according to the local chamber of commerce. Ninety two percent of the people living in this community are high school graduates and 49% are college graduates. Ninety three percent of the people are White, 4% Asian, 2% African American and 1% other. Expenditure per pupil, as reported in the school report card, is $5,896 as a district average, compared to the state average of $6,281.

In 1997, 7.9% of the students in this community were considered low income and 1.4% attended School B. Low income students are from families receiving public aid, living in institutions for neglected or delinquent children, being supported in foster homes with public funds, or eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches.

School B's district pupil cost is lower than all other county unit districts in that community, lower than half of the county's elementary school districts and lower than the state average. Pupil-teacher ratios are higher than the state average in all grades. The district has been moving deliberately to lower class sizes (School Report Card, 1998).

The school district in which School C is located is one of the largest districts in the state. It consists of 38 elementary schools, 7 middle schools and 4 high schools. The district has a 90 square mile boundary, which services 3 counties. The existing community has grown through

land annexation east and west of its traditional downtown along a river. The last major annexation is now being negotiated. It will add 1,125 acres of potential residential area.

School C is a community consisting of both white and blue collar workers, but predominantly white collar workers. The median family income is $56,688 and the median housing value is $122,692, according to the Elgin Area Association of Realtors. According to a local newspaper, 37.2% of the people living in this community are high school graduates and 8.5% are college graduates. Eighty nine point five percent of the people are White, 5.4% Hispanic, 1.9% Black and 3.2% Other. In 1997, 28.3% of the students in this community were considered low income, 24.2% attended school C (1998 School State Report Card). The instructional expenditure per pupil is $3,717 district wide. The pupil-teacher ratio for this site is 20.5:1.

Regional and National Context of Problem

The problem of student behavior and more specifically the long-term effects of negative peer interaction affecting the student, has generated concern at the state and national levels. Studies have yielded consistent findings relating popular status and acceptance with academic performance and rejected status and low levels of acceptance with academic difficulties (Austin and Draper, 1984: DeRosier, Kupersmidt and Patterson, 1994: Wentzel, 1991). Elementary school age children who are not well accepted by their classmates also appear to be at risk for dropping out during the high school years. Problematic childhood peer relations are associated with personal adjustment difficulties in adolescence and adulthood (Coie, Dodge and Kupersmidt, 1990). At the 3rd grade level, peer ratings, primarily peer rejection, were more powerful predictors of mental health problems 11 to 13 years later than were a variety of other predictors

such as intellectual ability, school grades, academic achievement, teacher ratings and self report data (Cowen, Pederson, Babigian, Izzo and Trost, 1973).

The results of some research studies have also shown that there are often problems in how students are being taught to handle peer conflict. Typically, children with social problems are taken out of the classroom setting away from their socially competent peers and taught social skills by a therapist. As a result, the issues of transfer and generalization have become a major concern outside the training environment in that, programs focusing on behaviors in isolated settings may have little or no reference to regular classroom context and its social environment (Fields, 1989).

According to the above research findings, negative peer interaction is a growing concern in today's schools. In light of the previously cited studies, there appears to be a need for research on the impact of teaching social skills, more specifically a problem solving strategy to promote positive peer interaction. Leonard Eron, in a 22-year longitudinal study, has found that aggressiveness toward peers at age 8 was related to various forms of aggressiveness at age 30, including "criminal behavior, number of moving traffic violations, convictions for driving while intoxicated, aggressiveness towards spouses and how severely the subjects punished their own children" (1987).

Research on dominant behavior in young children has revealed some extremely interesting patterns. Among two to five year olds, a child's place in the group dominance system is not related to popularity or to positive interactions between or with the child. Among elementary school age children, the dominance and popularity/friendship system may be linked.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM EVIDENCE AND PROBABLE CAUSES

Problem Evidence

In the targeted 6th grade class at School A, the targeted 4th grade class at School B and the targeted 2nd grade classes at School C, evidence of poor skills in peer conflict resolution were gathered using: a teacher observation checklist, anecdotal records and a student survey. The instrument used to assess the students' knowledge about conflict was a pre-survey questionnaire. It consisted of three multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question. The questions were: 1. What is a conflict? 2. How does a conflict make you feel? 3. During a conflict, how do you react? 4. What are some good behaviors you could use when you disagree with someone?

When 96 students were asked, "What is a conflict?" 79 recognized that conflict is a disagreement between friends. Whereas 14 students thought conflict was a day when you don't feel good and 3 thought it was when a teacher is angry with you. See Figure 1.

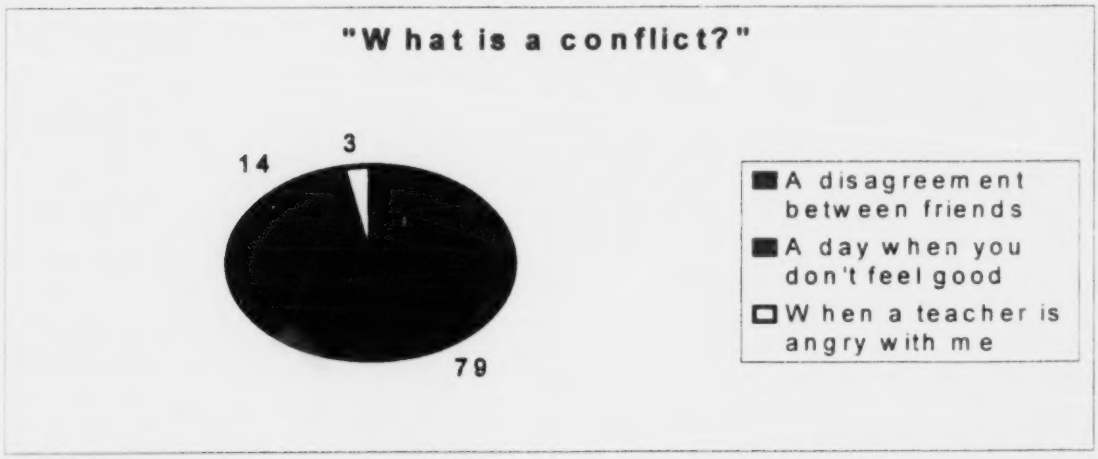

Figure 1 - The results to survey question: "What is a conflict?"

With regard to the survey question: "How does a conflict make you feel?" Forty-four of the students surveyed, indicated conflict made them feel uneasy. Thirty-eight students chose *mad* as their response and 14 of the students indicated I don't care. See Figure 2.

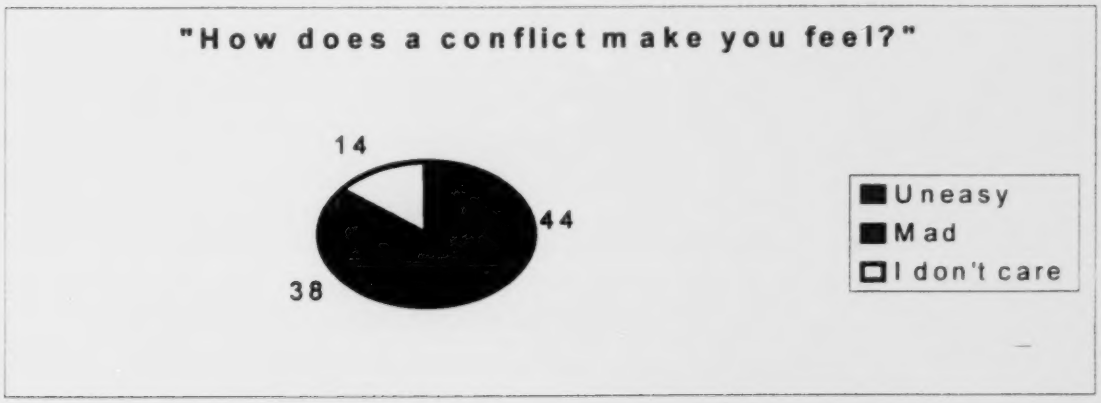

Figure 2 - The results to survey question: "How does a conflict make you feel?"

The students were then asked how they responded in a conflict situation. Students were given the following choices: hit someone or throw something, walk away mad, or use an I Message. Two of the students chose hit someone or throw something, 38 students chose walk away mad and 56 chose to use an I Message. See Figure 3.

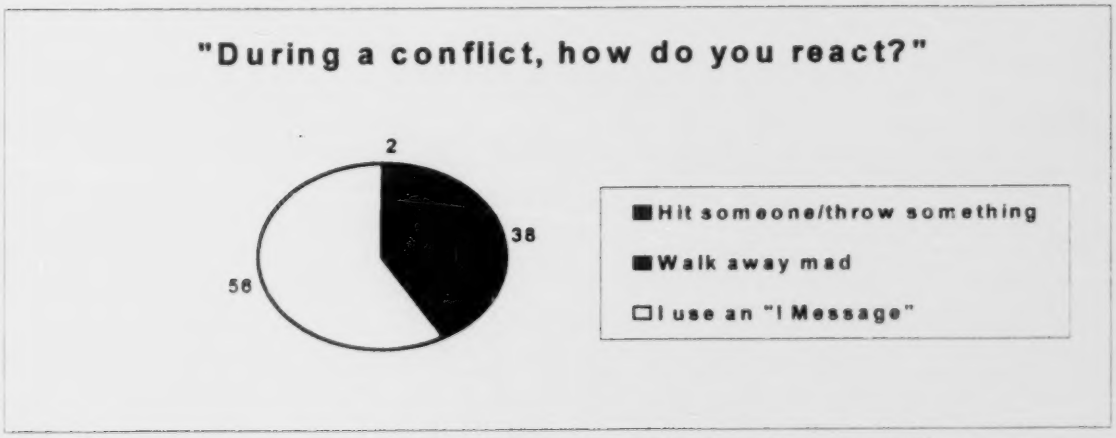

Figure 3 - The results of survey question: "During a conflict, how do you react?"

The results of question four were divided into three categories. Seventy students indicated a positive response in behaviors used when involved in a disagreement. Eight students indicated a display of negative behavior and 18 implied that no responsibility would be taken to solve the conflict. See Figure 4.

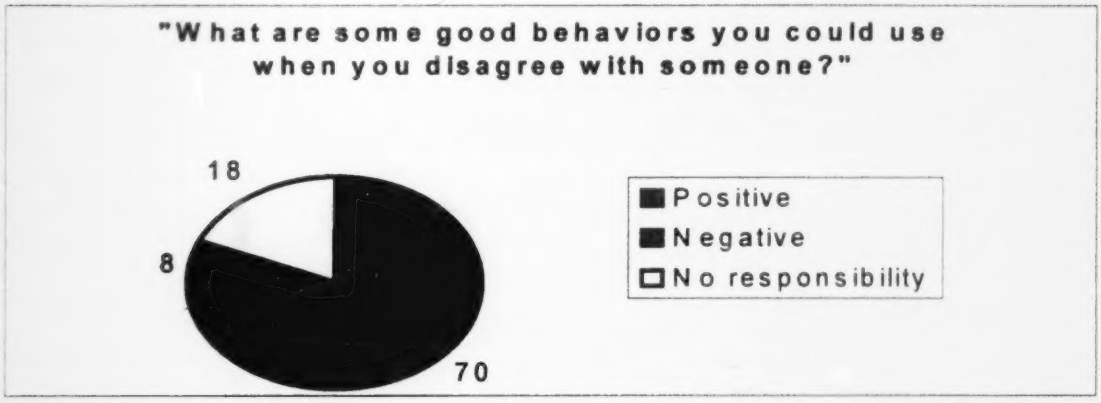

Figure 4 - The results to survey question: "What are some good behaviors you could use when you disagree with someone?"

The students in Schools A, B and C were observed for both negative and positive behaviors using the teacher observation checklist. Bullying, name calling, teasing, tattling and physical contact were the negative behaviors targeted. The positive behaviors targeted include: stating other child's name who is involved in the conflict, the use of happy talk/positive pieces, whether the child communicates what they want and if child verbalizes their feelings. At this time, the students exhibited more negative than positive behaviors.

Students were observed for a period of twenty minutes for the behaviors previously mentioned. Bullying was observed seven times in school settings A, B and C. Name calling occurred three times. Tattling occurred seventeen times and physical contact occurred eight times.

The positive behavior targeted was using happy talk. This occurred a total of three times. A child communicating what they wanted occurred a total of three times, with a child verbalizing their feelings occurring only once. There were thirty-five negative behaviors tallied during the observation, in comparison with the seven positive behaviors observed. See Figure 5.

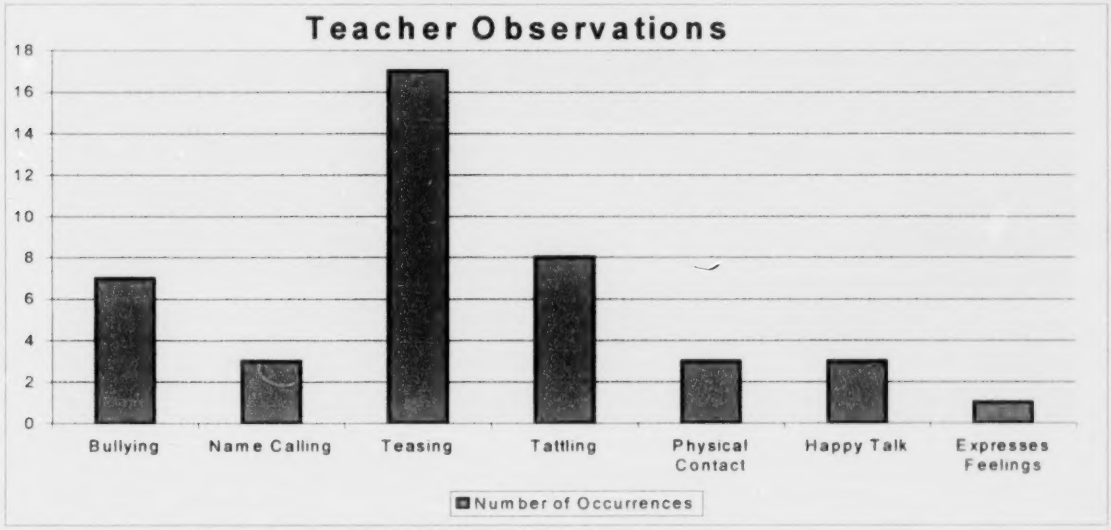

Figure 5 – Teacher Observations

Probable Causes

Students' poor conflict resolution skills may be caused by several factors. One such factor is the violent tendencies that are being modeled by society, media and the family unit. According to the 1992 report of the National Research Council, the United States is now the most violent of all industrialized nations. Specifically, more than half of all serious crimes (murder, rape, assault, robbery) in the United States are committed by youths age 10-17 (Winbush, 1988). As violence becomes the predominant method in our society for solving problems, the more appropriate it seems for children to use fighting, stabbing and shooting instead of negotiating to settle conflicts

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(Curwin, 1992). With the escalation of violence observed in our society, students are not being exposed to effective problem solving strategies.

Media also uses aggression as a means of resolving conflict. A study involving over-exposure to media violence shows that, individuals can desensitize to tragedies that they encounter in life (Huesmann, Eron, Klein, Brice, & Fischer, 1983). Kagan (1992) stated that television programs have a negative influence on children's social development. "More violent acts per minute are portrayed on children's TV programs than at any other time". The news gives a great deal of attention to the most violent acts; and movies often use aggressive means to resolve conflict. Because of this attention, children are being exposed to poor patterns of behavior. The images portrayed on television depict a more aggressive, often violent approach when dealing with others.

Not only does media show students poor examples on how to interact with others, but students who watch four or more hours of television on a daily basis also "lose opportunities to practice social interaction and communication skills" (Kubey, Czikszentmihalyi, 1990). The media also idolizes many famous athletes. Lisa Bennets 1998 article in *Teaching Tolerance* addresses several instances where professional athletes have shown a great deal of disrespect when dealing with other people. Heavyweight champion Mike Tyson served a prison sentence for raping an 18 year old woman, then returned to boxing and bit off a piece of his opponent's ear. In a December 1997 game, Denver Bronco linebacker Bill Romanowski spat in the face of his opponent; and, during a practice last season, Golden State Warriors basketball star Latrell Sprewell allegedly choked, struck and threatened to kill his coach. With prominent athletes, along with television and movie actors, using these tactics in conflict situations it is easy to see why the younger

generations feel these aggressive means of conflict resolution are acceptable. The researchers of this project have observed students admiring sports figures.

The family also serves as a model on how to interact in problem situations. Outside of military and law enforcement agencies, the family is considered to be the most violent institution in our society. Seventeen percent of all homicides occur in family situations; in half of these homicides one spouse killed the other (Myers, 1993). Also, there is a rise in marriages that end in divorce where the child is often a witness to the anger and bitterness that often becomes part of the breakup of a family. With society, media and the family unit modeling such aggressive behavior, it is not difficult to understand why students lack conflict resolution skills.

Nattiv, Render, Lemire and Render (1990) defined conflict resolution as a complex skill built on the practice and mastery of simpler communication skills. The authors noted that this ability to interact requires: a. awareness of others, b. awareness of the distinction between self and others, c. skill in listening and hearing, d. awareness of ones' feelings and thoughts and e. the ability to respond to the feelings and thoughts of others.

Another underlying cause that contributes to students' poor conflict resolution skills is lack of children's previous knowledge with regard to peer conflict. According to Wallach (1994), not all children respond to difficult situations in the same way. There are many factors that influence coping abilities, including maturational age, temperament and the ability to deal with stress. Students must be taught communication skills and problem solving techniques, but they must also be given opportunities to practice decision making in their own lives to solve problems productively (Shulman, 1996). "Conflict resolution is a recent concept. It is still not part of any consensual understanding" (Burton 1993).

Most conflict resolution training programs seek to instill attitudes, knowledge and skills that are conducive to effective, cooperative problem solving (Deutsch, 1993). In years past, the church, family and school shared the role of teaching social skills to children. Over the course of 50 years, changes in family structure and the declining influence in children's lives of organized religion have resulted in an increased role for the schools (Muscott, Gifford, 1994). Today, schools are given the added responsibility of teaching socialization skills and providing students opportunities to use these skills to become more meaningful to their everyday life.

Children frequently lack exposure to the necessary elements involved in communication skills among their peers. When communication skills are called upon to resolve conflict, students often resort to verbal or physical aggression as a means of solving the problem. The fault for this, the authors believe, lies in the lack of previous exposure and training to healthy peer conflict resolution. Historically, schools have taken both convergent and reactionary approaches to social skills training typically waiting for students to show maladaptive behavior prior to intervening (Muscolt & Neel, 1988). Children are not being taught or trained what to do in a problem situation, but instead reprimanded for their inappropriate behavior after the problem occurs.

According to Kohlberg, moral development occurs in a sequence of three levels. Each level contains two stages that are age related, however, there is no defined age at which each child enters a given stage. The levels are determined by the abilities of what can be learned during that period. Each level displays a different basis for determining the moral and just way to solve a dilemma in a fair manner (1984). Because these levels are not defined by age, but by ability, students entering a particular grade may enter in various levels of moral development. The level of moral development a child is moving through will play a factor in the way he or she is able

to respond in a conflict situation. Maturational age can also cause different responses in conflict situations. Whether a child matures early or late has a significant influence on his and her social behavior and personality. (Jones & Bayley, 1950; Mussen & Jones, 1957, 1958).

Research states boys who mature early in adolescence perceive themselves more positively and are more successful in peer relations than their late-maturing counterparts. Early maturing boys were rated more composed and more socially sophisticated than the late-maturing boys (Santrock, 1983). In general, early maturation seems to have positive psychological benefits for girls as well, but the results are not as clear cut as those for boys (Jones & Mussen, 1958).

These researchers have observed that competition appears to be another cause of poor conflict resolution among peers at the targeted site. According to M. Deutsch, the definition of competition is "individuals working against each other to achieve a goal that only one or a few can attain." When situations become competitive, the individual feels that in order to attain his goal, the other participants cannot attain their set goals. Competition causes a negative correlation in reaching goals (Deutsch, 1949). Individuals are seeking an outcome with direct personal benefits, which is detrimental to all others involved in the activity. In competitive situations, inductivity is low and the participants interact negatively with each other (D.W. Johnson & R.T. Johnson, 1991).

One of the implications of competition is that most students lose. Students that continually lose, set unrealistic goals or none at all. Rather than focusing on student competition, teachers should emphasize cooperation (Slavin, 1981). Although it is recognized that competition is an unavoidable part of every day life, students need to be nurtured in achievement related activities (Glover, Bruning, & Filbeck, 1982).

A summary of the possible causes for poor conflict resolution skills include:

1. Inadequate role modeling
    - society
    - media
    - family
2. No previous knowledge or training in peer to peer conflict.
3. Maturational age
4. Competition

The above causes can contribute to the poor choices students make when involved in a conflict with their peers. Fortunately, there are some solutions to the problem.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

A review of the literature reveals several solutions for improving conflict resolution skills among students. Examples include: direct teaching of social skills, using cooperative learning activities, teaching three step peer conflict resolution skills and role playing activities using three peer conflict resolution steps.

Contributing to inappropriate social behavior are: aggressive behavior being modeled by society in conflict situations, the various maturational development ages at which students enter the classroom, the lack of social training and the competition among peers. The need for social skills training is evident. Cook, Senders and Torgerson all remark in their research paper that student behavior is a nationwide educational concern. Literature suggests causes for the behavior problems including: students' lack of social skills, lack of positive role models, lack of self-esteem, lack of positive parental involvement, media violence and childhood abuse (1995). David Kahan and Regina McKnight believe that decision-making skills, interpersonal skills and acceptance of personal responsibility for one's actions are better learned when students actively participate in their own behavior management (1998). Students can actively participate in their own behavior management in cooperative group learning activities and in role playing activities after they have been taught social skills.

Wittmer and Honig (1994) state that pro-social interaction can be increased and aggression decreased if teachers take time to encourage, facilitate and teach pro-social behaviors.

McDermott agrees and adds that teaching pro-social skills and intervening before there is a conflict are also important (1999). Opportunities exist at every turn to bolster children's fragile, developing self-images. Effective communication should build children's self-confidence in three ways: by giving them credit for what they know; by expressing respect for their ability to choose; and by giving specific information about what you like, or don't like, about their behavior (Andrews & Skutch, 1988). Bellanca & Fogarty refer to Johnson's study citing that children who are instructed in cooperative learning have more interest in school, demonstrate less inappropriate social behavior and interact more positively with their classmates (1991).

The Teaching of Social Skills

Although the responsibility of teaching social skills was previously the responsibility of the parents, social skills instruction needs to be taught and reinforced in the classroom, because many students come to school without social skills training. Social skills can be taught through cooperative learning activities. Schumaker remarks that the instructor may have to help the students develop the specific social skills that will be necessary for the group to function efficiently (1992). If teachers take the time to educate students in social skills, they will spend less time "correcting" and "disciplining" disruptive students throughout the year (Bellanca, 1991; Burke, 1992).

Bellanca insists that the ideal social skills program would provide some modeling, guided practice and constructive feedback in cooperative social skills; along with language development and fun activities that make learning an active engagement for all students. More importantly, social skills are the basic tools that enable students to discover the world of mutual respect.

The goal is for students to learn these skills to use for a lifetime (1992). Caroline Manuele and Terry Cicchelli report that social skills training programs offer an effective means of controlling behavior problems in the classroom. Modeling, role-playing, reinforcement and transfer of training, are suggested methods for inducing behavioral change (1984).

Teaching Conflict Resolution

Teaching students three steps to conflict resolution will also help reduce inappropriate behavior in conflict situations. Conflict resolution skills provide students with the capability to solve problems, negotiate and compromise, at the right times (Fogarty & Bellanca, 1992). According to Rice, children must learn that conflict in life is natural. It is the teachers' role to give children experiences and help them develop skills to handle conflict in appropriate ways. Children will then be able to see that conflict is a challenging part of life, but not a way of life. The three-step process involves:

1. Looking at the other child and stating the child's name.
2. Giving an I Message.
3. Telling the other child what you want.

Many adults believe that children are not capable of solving their own problems and thus deny children the opportunity of learning problem solving skills. Rice disagrees and states that: "Children are naturally forgiving and are empowered by solving problems themselves" (1995).

The three-step process is successful for several reasons. One reason is that looking at another child involves eye contact. Another reason this process is successful is because the children state the other child's name, thus getting their attention and ensuring listening.

According to Bodine, Crawford and Schrumpf, active listening is crucial to effective communication. Also important in communication is the skill of clearly telling the other person what you want. Even a good listener, one who uses active listening skills, can hear what is actually said. Therefore, the speaker needs to speak to be understood (Bodine, Crawford, Schrumpf, 1998). For example, giving an I Message, " I feel hurt when you don't play with me," informs another child of your feelings. Finally, telling the other child what you want, offers a solution to the conflict situation.

I Messages allow children to tell others they want them to change in their behavior without blaming them or putting them down, thus creating a positive atmosphere for communication and problem solving. When sending I Messages, kids state how they feel, tell what the other person does that makes them feel that way and then states what they would like to have happen. When using an I Message it is necessary to avoid going into an attack tone of voice.

While conflict is a part of living, it is not always harmful. Children will not always agree and insisting that they always agree would rob them the opportunity to fully participate in a group effort (Kohn, 1990). Rice warns if we emphasize the existence of conflict too much, we run the risk that children may expect and create conflict where it doesn't exist (1995).

The use of I Messages will help students in dealing with the three basic conflict resolution styles: avoidance, confrontation and problem solving. Avoidance means steering clear of conflict. If students are avoiding conflict, they feel threatened by conflict. Sometimes avoidance is smart, but consistently avoiding conflict may lead to anger, resentment and loneliness. Students can be taught strategies for handling conflict instead of avoiding conflict.

Confrontation is the second conflict style, which is an aggressive, in-your-face approach to conflict. Making confrontation a habit can result in fights. Researchers suggest teaching kids to state what they desire in a non-aggressive approach. These skills can be taught.

Using I Messages, students will be led to the third conflict style which is problem solving. Problem solving means working to find solutions to conflict. Students will freely state their own feelings and opinions and be willing to compromise using the I Message. If problem solving becomes the students main style, the students will not be threatened by conflict, or fear it, but rather, this would be a natural part of life (Sunburst Communications, 1994).

Edwards points out that the utmost concern to children is finding their place in the classroom where they spend at least six hours a day. "The school is a child's society" (1995). Dreikurs and Soltz have stated that the strongest motivation a child has is the desire to belong (1995). Role-playing is an important part of teaching children how to interact appropriately with peers in conflict situations, thus helping children maintain interpersonal relationships. Herman & Jacobs use role playing to teach students how to think flexibly, to understand behavior, to solve conflicts and to walk in another's shoes. Role-playing can also be used to check for understanding in instructional situations (1992). Rice believes that children who learn to reach out and empathize with others, to accept and celebrate differences between themselves, to communicate their feelings and resolve conflicts in constructive ways and to love, become contributing members of the community. She further states that we must set standards and expectations for our children that help them develop their intrinsic capacities to be honest, courageous, wise and compassionate (1995). Kohlberg reports that programs, which provide an opportunity for students to be a part of a democratic just community, actively engage in moral

dilemma discussions, positively affect behavior. Role-playing provides students with an opportunity to find the tools to transform their environment and to actively engage in the process for change (1985).

Teaching Cooperating Learning Strategies

Teaching cooperative learning activities is also an important part in reducing conflict situations among peers. According to Kay Burke, "A teacher's goal should be to provide the framework of a caring, cooperative classroom so that students begin to handle their own individual discipline problems, problems within their groups and class-wide problems." Burke further states that problem-solving should be taught, modeled, monitored and re-taught as needed throughout the school year if students are expected to assume the responsibility for their own actions (1992). Bellanca agrees with this statement and adds that teaching social skills in cooperative learning activities in primary grades provide the best opportunity for students to develop the foundation of social skills. Bellanca also believes the emphasis on skills must be continued in the middle grades and high school because that is where the peer pressure is strongest (1991). Kohn adds that the school may need to provide instruction of social skills for the children who are not taught these skills at home. He feels there is no conceivable danger in providing these values in both environments (1990).

Cooperative learning promotes higher achievement than competitive and individualistic learning structures across all age levels, subject areas and almost all tasks. Among the studies examined by Slavin, 63% showed superior outcomes for cooperative learning, 33% showed no differences and only 4% showed higher achievement for the traditional comparison groups (1991). A consistent finding in cooperative learning research has also been the improved ethnic

relations among students. According to a study in a traditional classroom, students listed 9.8% of their friends from a race other than their own; in contrast, students in the cooperative classroom listed 37.9% as friends, from a different race. In some studies there have been dramatic reductions or elimination of self segregation among students following relatively brief cooperative learning experiences (Kagan, Widaman, Schwarzwald, & Tyrell, 1985). The ability to adjust one's behavior to work effectively with others and to communicate with others can be learned only in the process of working and interacting with others. Thus, cooperative learning is a necessary part of curriculum reform if we are to prepare our students for the job world of the future. Almost all studies that compare the self-esteem of students following cooperative to traditional interaction show significant gains favoring students in cooperative classrooms; the remaining studies show no significant differences. None of the studies had results which favored traditional structures. This outcome is probably related to improved peer relations and to improved academic achievement (Slavin, 1991).

A cooperative learning environment is necessary to improving school climate and providing an enhanced learning environment. When conflict solving strategies are applied, then respect, tolerance, caring and community building become "the way we do things around here" (Bodine & Crawford, 1998). Creating an environment, which focuses on cooperative strategies, enables the students to better handle conflicts in and out of the classroom.

A study done by Keith F. Punch and Beverley Moriarty found that in a cooperative condition, most student interactions were on-task, whereas in the competitive conditions, all student interactions were off-task. In addition to that finding, groups that began the term in the competitive condition and then switched to cooperative learning had difficulty changing to on-

task behaviors (1997). Gloria B. Solomon found that, in her plan to enhance the social skill development of elementary school students', communication skills, cooperation and sharing among students increased (1997).

It appears from the research that the teaching of cooperative learning skills and the weekly use of these skills incorporated into the classroom can enhance pro-social behaviors. The three-step process of teaching conflict resolution skills is seen favorably by behavioral and educational researchers. Thus, these researchers have decided to implement the aforementioned strategies as a solution to the problem of lack of appropriate conflict resolution skills.

Project Objective

As a result of students inability to respond appropriately in conflict situations with their peers, during the periods of August 1999 through December 1999, the targeted second, fourth and sixth grades: will increase their ability to listen to each other, articulate their feelings positively and offer solutions for a "win-win" compromise as measured by teacher observational checklists of student behavior, anecdotal records, teacher journal entries and student awareness surveys of resolution awareness.

In order to accomplish these objectives, the following procedures will be implemented:

1. Selected social skills will be emphasized.
2. Students will be taught a three-step process for conflict resolution.
3. Students will actively participate in role playing, cooperative group activities to show transfer of conflict resolution strategies in real life situations.

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the social skill interventions, a post student survey will be completed and compared with the pre-intervention student survey. This survey will identify which students recognize what a conflict is, how a student should behave or react and how to offer solutions in conflict situations. In addition to the student survey, a teacher observation checklist will be used to record both positive and negative behaviors exhibited throughout the intervention. Anecdotal records will be kept by the teacher on a weekly basis. These records will show how a given student responded in a conflict situation during the intervention.

Action Plan

Week 1 **Teacher Preparation: Develop materials that promote positive interaction**

Bulletin Boards / posters

Student Awareness Survey - pre/post assessment of resolution awareness

Videotape - movie

Problem Solving Worksheet

Create T-charts

Week 2 **Cooperative Classroom Setup**

Teacher assigned base groups of three

KWL

- What you know?
- What you want to know?
- What you learned?

Student Survey

Responsibility Web

Objective: Students will identify ways to be responsible at school.

Procedure: A web graphic organizer will be used to list and rank responsibilities at school and a responsibility worksheet will also be completed by the students.

Week 3 **The Talking Wand**

Objective: To become a better listener and control the urge to interrupt.

Procedure: Discuss with the class that it is impolite to interrupt when someone is talking. Only the person holding the wand can talk. This will help the class become better listeners.

Teacher Observation Checklist

Week 4 **Happy Talk**

Objective: Students will focus on using nice words instead of hurtful words.

Procedure: Students will put all words that are hurtful into a wastebasket and happy words on a poster labeled "happy talk".

Week 5 **Blanket Pictures and Story**

Objective: Students will see how a problem is solved.

Procedure: Read a picture book that involves a peer conflict situation. Half way through the book ask the class what the problem is and how the characters should solve it. Next, have groups act out the possible solutions.

Week 6 **Mad Hatter**

Objective: Students will handle anger in a constructive way.

Procedure: Discuss ways children can respond when they feel angry or unhappy. Students will write responses on how to react in a conflict situation. Positive responses are place on a white hat and negative responses are placed on a black hat.

Weeks 7 **I Messages**

Objective: Students are introduced to the concept of I Messages.

Procedure: Brainstorm with the class how they feel in a conflict. Teacher demonstrates the use of I Messages and why they are important. Students will be given a scenario on a worksheet. Students will practice using an I Message pertaining to that particular conflict.

Week 8 **Emotion Cube**

Objective: Students will practice I Messages.

Procedure: Students will create a conflict cube by cutting pictures out of a magazine that show emotion. Students will then use the cube by rolling it to

determine which emotion to act out. Students will use an I Message to appropriately act out the situation.

Week 9 **Problem Solving Table**

Objective: Students will use a semiprivate place for sitting down in a group. They will peacefully find solutions to various problems.

Procedure: Students create a problem-solving table where they can sit with other children to solve problems. When a conflict arises that cannot easily be resolved, bring the children to the table where the teacher will mediate the discussion.

Week 10 **The Great Predictor**

Objective: Students will practice predicting the future impact of one's own and others' behavior.

Procedure: Children take turns wearing a turban and answering teacher directed questions designed to get the children thinking about consequences and rewards of their actions.

Week 11 **Bully Up**

Objective: Students will brainstorm ideas on how to deal with a bully.

Procedure: Show the video "Bully Up: Fighting Feelings." In groups of three, children will answer the questions to a worksheet about the video.

Week 12 **Conflict Identification**

Objective: Students will identify conflicts in everyday life.

Procedure: Students will work independently and write a conflict situation on an index card for future use in a role playing activity.

Week 13 **Conflict Resolution**

Objective: Students will identify other strategies for solving conflicts.

Procedure: Teacher introduced various strategies for solving conflict solutions.

Week 14 **Cartoon Conflict**

Objective: Students will identify a conflict and possible resolution to the problem.

Procedure: Students will use a T-chart to list different components of the conflict. They will also use a comic strip to show the conflict happening and a possible resolution.

Week 15 **Conflict Pantomime**

Objective: Students will act out solutions to solve real life problems.

Procedure: Students will act out the real life problems generated by themselves.

Week 16 **Student Survey POST**

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of this project was to increase students' ability to listen to each other, articulate their feelings positively and offer solutions for a "win-win" compromise. The implementation of teacher observational checklists of student behavior, anecdotal records, teacher journal entries and student awareness surveys of resolution awareness were chosen to address the desired changes. The interventions were initiated in August and concluded in December 1999.

In August 1999, during the first week of the school year, each teacher introduced school rules and positive behavior. The second week of school, the students in the targeted classrooms were observed for both negative and positive behaviors using teacher observation checklists. An example of this checklist can be found in Appendix A. It should be noted that the number of students who participated in the posttest survey declined. The researchers believe that the cause of this decline was student mobility, student absences and student pull-out for other academic classes. Situations that students encountered were: bullying, name calling, teasing, tattling, physical contact, happy talk and the expression of one's feelings.

Students participated in social skills training for thirty minutes each week, emphasizing conflict resolution strategies. Social skills were taught through cooperative learning activities. Conflict resolution lessons involved using a three-step process involving stating the child's name, giving an I Message and telling the other child what you want. Students were encouraged to express feelings related to the conflicts they experienced in role-playing activities. Lesson plans devoted to each of these skills can be found in Appendices C-F.

The Pre-Intervention Results showed the most often observed negative behavior was teasing. Tattling and bullying were also areas that reflected multiple occurrences. The number of negative behaviors out-weighed the number of positive behaviors observed.

The Post Intervention Results showed that the number of teasing and bullying incidents declined. Interestingly, the number of tattling and name calling incidents increased. The researchers believe that making a teacher aware of a situation can be better than displaying a negative behavior. Occurrences of physical contact incidents remained the same. The number of happy talk and expressions of feelings appeared to increase as a result of the interventions. See figures 10 and 10-A.

Pre-Intervention survey results showed that many of the students in the targeted classrooms were aware of what I Messages were, but the researchers' observation checklists did not reflect that students were using the I Messages. A number of students believed that walking away mad was an acceptable way of handling conflict situations. The researchers agree that walking away mad is a more appropriate way of responding to conflict than hitting someone or throwing something, however, walking away mad does not solve the problem. Fortunately, most of the students in the targeted classrooms realized that hitting someone or throwing something was an inappropriate reaction to a conflict situation.

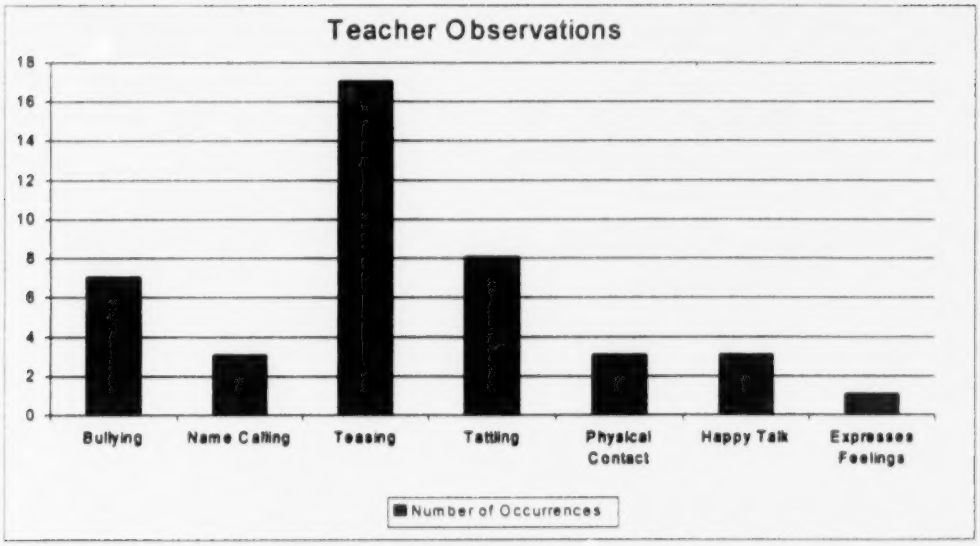

Figure 10 - Teacher Observations (Pre-Intervention Results)

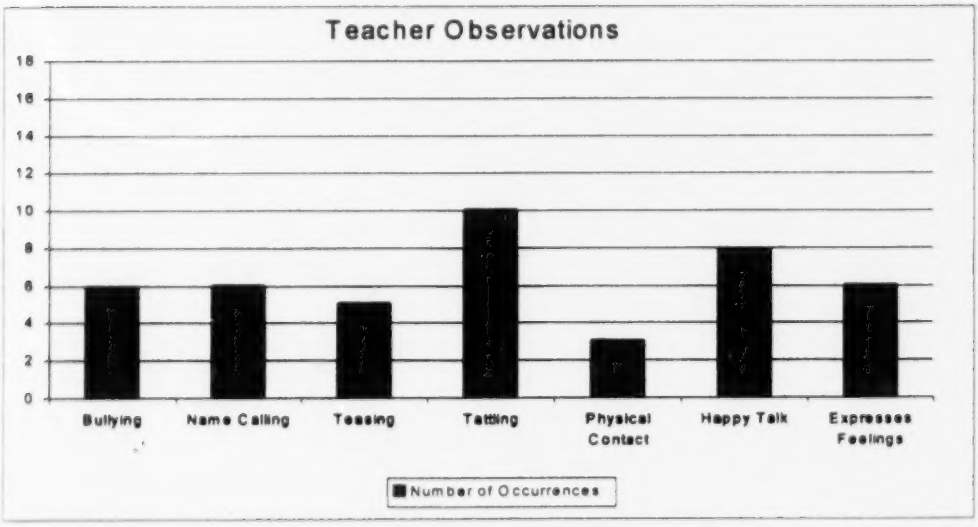

Figure 10-A – Teacher Observations (Post Intervention Results)

Following the intervention period, the surveys showed a marked increase in using an I Message in conflict situations. In addition, there was a decrease in the number of students who felt that walking away mad was an appropriate response in a conflict situation. Interestingly, the number of students who felt that hitting someone or throwing something remained the same.

During the sixteen-week intervention, the researchers evaluated students' understanding and demonstration of the social skills and conflict resolution strategies emphasized that week. The action plan was altered to accommodate the different levels of the targeted classrooms. Posters were created by the students and teacher and displayed during the intervention. These posters emphasized the value of listening to each other, using positive language and acceptable conflict resolution responses. Classroom seating was arranged to create a positive atmosphere. A variety of methods were implemented throughout the intervention and can be found in the Appendix. As the school year progressed, it became evident that some of the lessons were not age-appropriate to use with each of the targeted groups. The lack of time available because of content area and contact time also became a deterrent when implementing all of the social skill lessons and strategies.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of social skills training and use of the three-step process in conflict resolution, both a pre and posttest were administered. The results of the posttest survey are reported in Figures 6-A, 7-A, 8-A, 9-A. The researchers agree that there could be outside factors that influence the results of this survey. The pretest was administered during the second week of school, which is known as the "honeymoon period." During this time, students are usually on their best behavior. The posttest was administered the week after

Christmas. Many of the students had been shuffled to different houses during the holiday break. The stress of the holidays may have played a factor.

The results of the student surveys indicate that the behavior of conflict identification did not change notably in regards to identifying what a conflict is. Also, the behavior of how a conflict makes you feel and how you react during a conflict did not change. However, results indicate students were able to identify more positive behaviors that could be used when you disagree with someone.

Some of the lessons seemed inappropriate for the students in School A. These lessons were modified to meet the maturational needs of these older students. However, the need for conflict resolution strategies and social skills training was evident. The lesson on Happy Talk was changed to Positive Pieces, as well as the video needed to address appropriate responses for students of that age level. The building has in place a Peer Mediation Program, which enables students to have difficulties mediated by a third party. Initially the researcher felt that having this program in place would overshadow the classroom interventions, however, classroom interventions appeared to reduce the number of peer mediation requests. Two students were unresponsive to the intervention despite numerous attempts by the researcher to involve these students in activities.

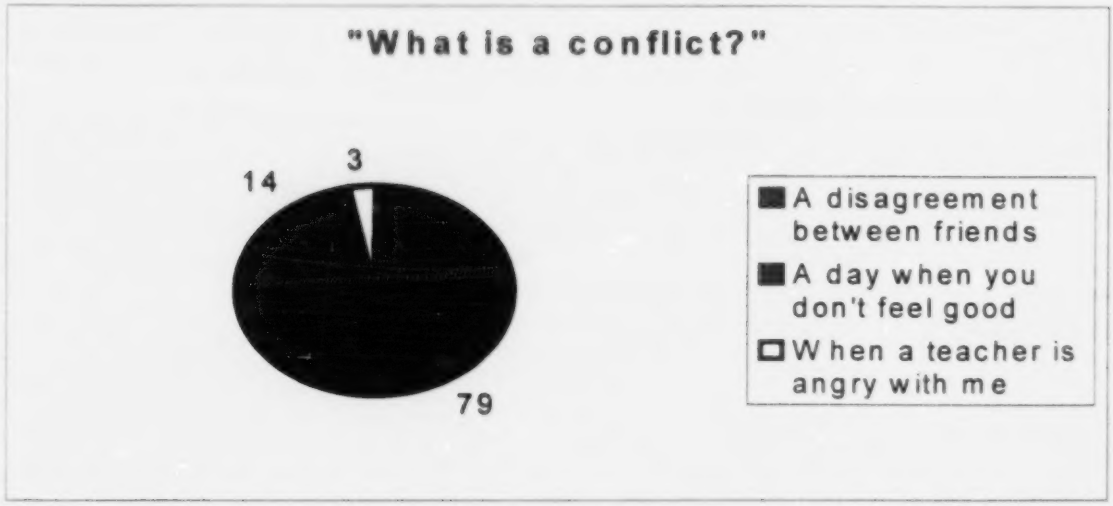

Figure 6 (Pre-Intervention Results) The results to survey question: "What is a conflict?"

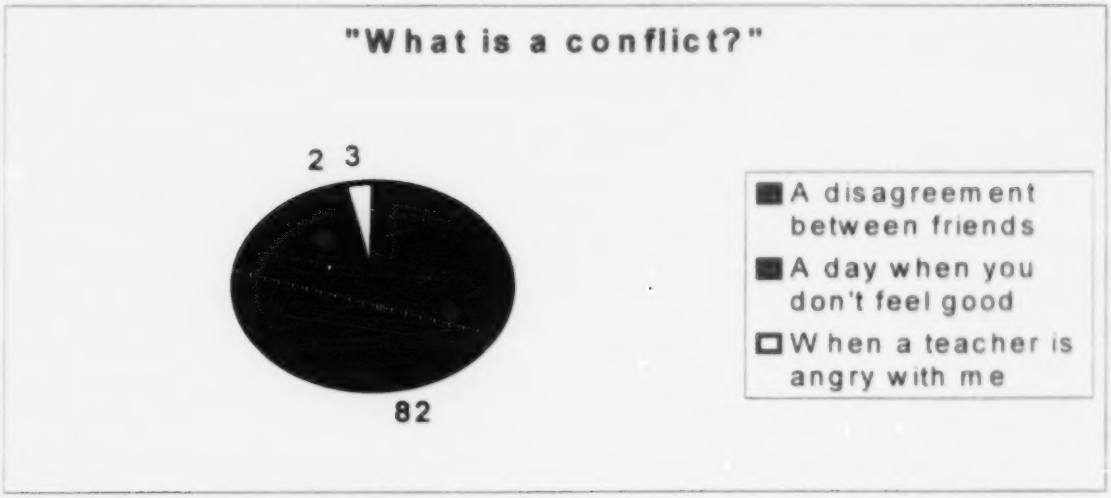

Figure 6-A (Post Intervention Results) The results to survey question: "What is a conflict?"

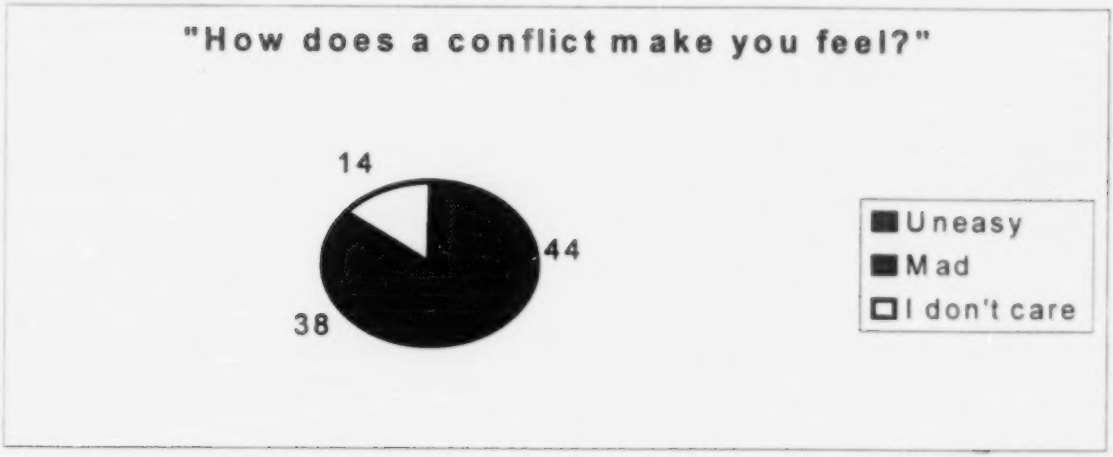

Figure 7 (Pre-Intervention Results)
The results to survey question: "How does a conflict make you feel?"

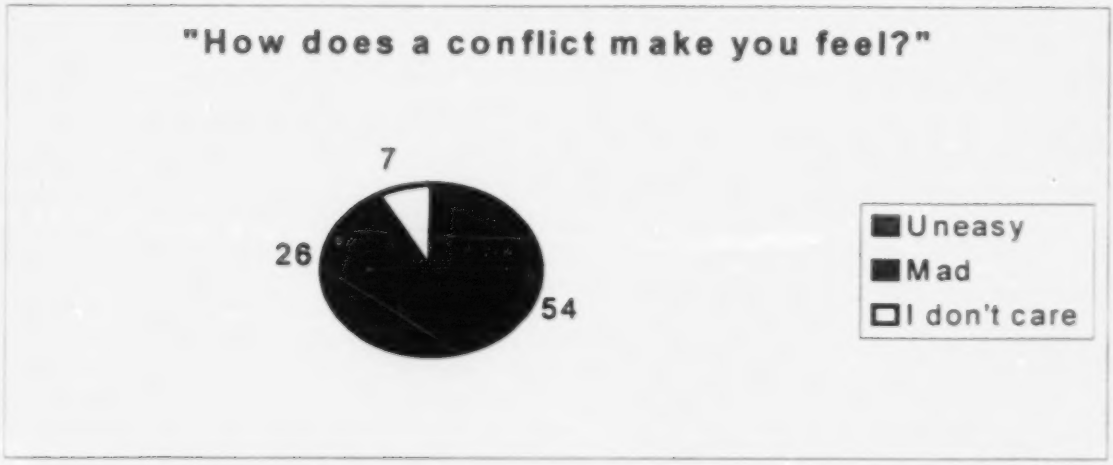

Figure 7-A (Post Intervention Results)
The results to survey question: "How does a conflict make you feel?"

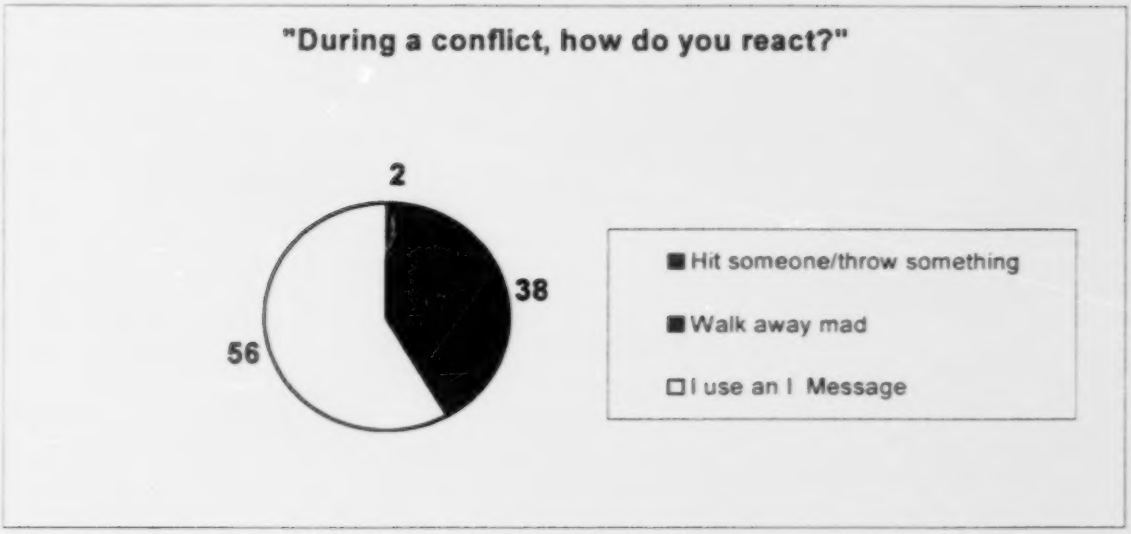

Figure 8 (Pre-Intervention Results)
The results to survey question: "During a conflict, how do you react?"

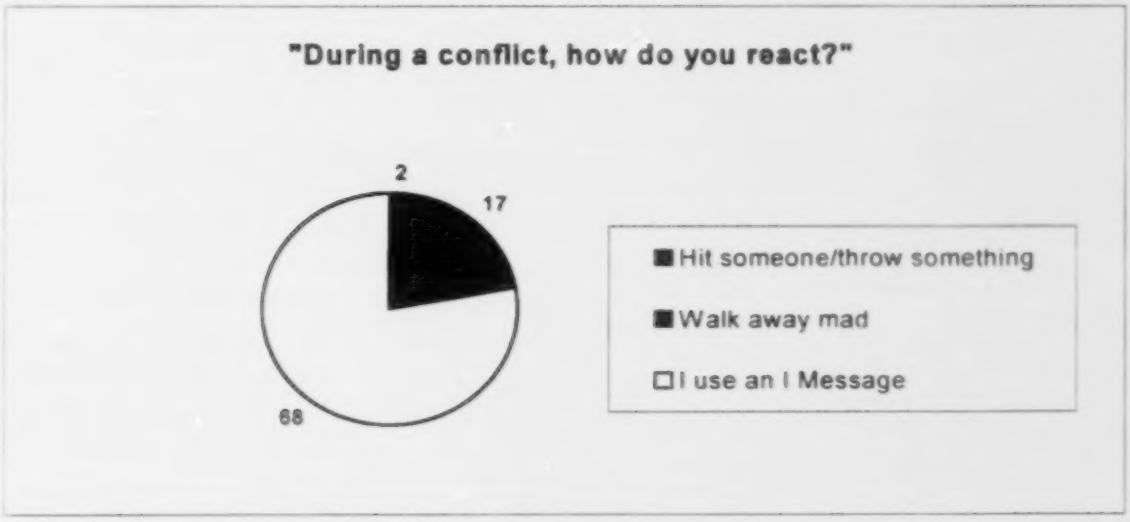

Figure 8-A (Post Intervention Results)
The results to survey question: "During a conflict, how do you react?"

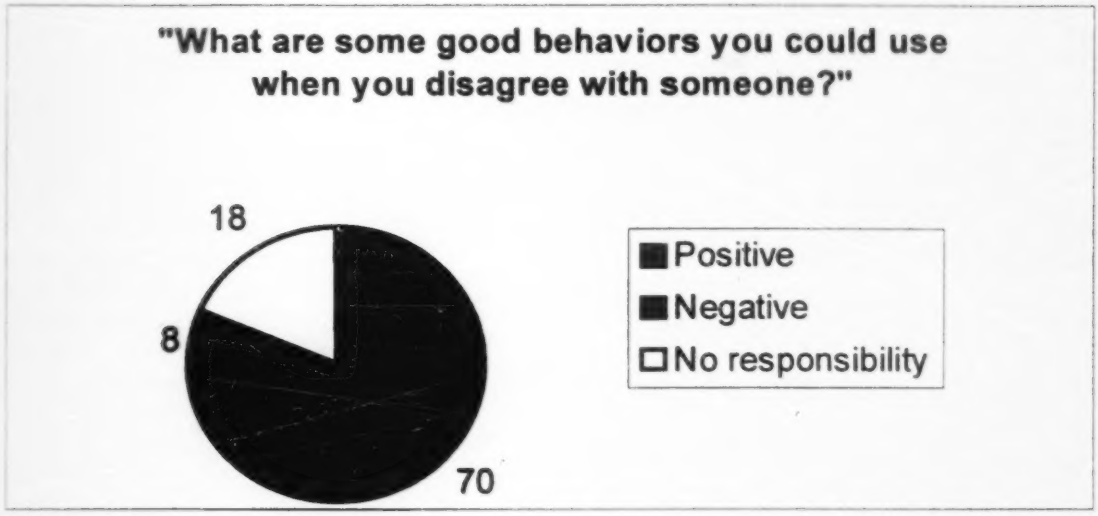

Figure 9 (Pre-Intervention Results)
The results to survey question: "What are some good behaviors you could use when you disagree with someone?"

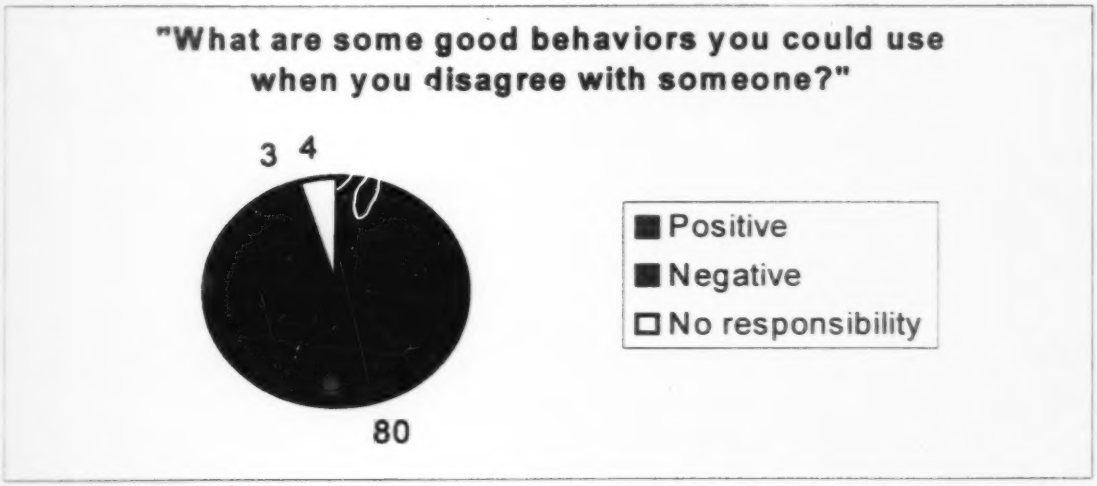

Figure 9-A (Post Intervention Results)
The results of survey question: "What are some good behaviors you could use when you disagree with someone?"

Intervention strategies in School B were necessary because of the continual conflict situations the students in this grade level have been involved in over the years. Although the students listened attentively during the thirty minute lessons, the transfer into their everyday lives was not evident. Three students in this classroom have a history of repeated conflicts involving other students in the grade level. These students have a difficult time in conflict situations and their behavior impacts the entire classroom. These students seemed unresponsive to the interventions and they continue to display inappropriate behavior in conflict situations. During role-playing activities, these students seemed to have appropriate responses, however, these responses were not evident outside the role-playing activities. After conflict situations, these students were able to verbally express what they should have done, but were not able to respond this way due to impulsive behavior. For this site, additional time, frequency and reinforcement of learning may have helped this intervention have a greater impact.

In School C1, the majority of the targeted students responded positively to the intervention. There were however, two students who had difficulty during social skill instruction. These students participated in inappropriate behavior including bullying, tattling, name-calling, physical contact and teasing throughout intervention. Despite numerous attempts by the researcher to correct these behaviors and redirect their attention, the students continued exhibiting these inappropriate behaviors. Lessons were modified and re-taught to these students. The behavior of these students impacted the other classmates.

In School C2, implementing the intervention was difficult because students were only seen once a week for thirty minutes. Contact time with students had to be increased an additional twenty minutes in order to address the physical education curriculum along with social skills

instruction. Because of the limited contact time each week, the researcher was unable to reinforce strategies taught in the classroom, or observe the effectiveness of the instruction during the week. There was difficulty at times connecting the physical education lesson with the social skills interventions, although the need for conflict resolution skills was apparent.

One of the instruments used to assess the student's knowledge about conflict was a pre-intervention survey containing the following questions: 1. What is conflict? 2. How does a conflict make you feel? 3. During a conflict, how do you react? 4. What are some good behaviors you could use when you disagree with someone? This survey was administered prior to the social skills training and then again sixteen weeks later.

The comparison of the results to question one, "What is conflict?" shows an increased awareness in students' perception of what conflict is. Prior to the social skill lessons 79 of 96 students surveyed felt conflict was a disagreement between friends. In the post survey 82 of 87 students surveyed felt conflict was a disagreement between friends. The researchers feel the social skill lessons increased student awareness of conflict as a problem to solve between friends, rather than as a day when you don't feel good, or when a teacher is angry with me. The decrease in students who chose conflict being a day when you don't feel good, appears to indicate that students are taking responsibility to solve a problem. The survey indicated no change with the three students who perceived conflict as a day when a teacher is angry with me.

The comparison of the results of question two, "How does conflict make you feel?" show an increase in feelings of uneasiness and a decrease in feeling mad. The number of students indicating that conflict made them feel uneasy increased after social skill interventions was implemented. Prior to interventions, 44 of the 96 chose uneasy, where as 54 of the 87 students

chose uneasy on their post intervention survey. The number of students indicating that conflict made them feel mad decreased in the post intervention results. The researchers feel the decrease in the number of students who chose mad as their result to conflict is a positive step toward conflict resolution. The students who answered I don't care, also decreased from the pre intervention survey results. Figures 8, 8-A, 9, 9-A compare data collected before the social skill intervention with data collected following the interventions.

Prior to intervention, when students were asked, "During a conflict, how do you react?" 56 of the 96 students responded that they would use an I Message. Following intervention, 68 of 87 students responded they would use an I Message. Thirty-eight responded they would walk away mad prior to intervention. Seventeen responded they would walk away mad following intervention. Two students responded that they would hit someone or throw something prior to and following intervention.

When responding to question four, "What are some good behaviors you could use when you disagree with someone?" prior to intervention, there were seventy positive responses. There was an increase of ten positive responses following interventions. Pre intervention testing showed eight negative responses and declined to three during post intervention testing. Students showing no responsibility in a conflict situation went from eighteen responses in pre intervention to four responses following intervention.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the presentation and analysis of the behavior observation checklists, anecdotal records and student completed surveys, the student's showed a noticeable improvement in positive behavior and marginal change in negative behavior. The social skill interventions had a similar effect among all targeted grade levels despite the age difference. According to the behavior observation checklist, researchers observed a decrease of both physical and verbal aggression and an increase in alternative resolution skills in the classroom. The researchers experienced a decline in the amount of time devoted to off task behavior which allowed for more academic learning time. Due to the decrease of negative behaviors, direct instruction time was increased and the teacher's energy was focused on strengthening content area. The social skills interventions used were also witnessed in other areas of the school suggesting the transfer of the targeted skills. For example, students were overheard on several occasions using I Messages in conflict situations outside the classroom. This has a favorable effect on students' interpersonal behavior.

The transfer of using I Messages could be seen throughout the school day. Students demonstrated the ability to solve conflicts among themselves rather than relying on teacher intervention. Students were also able to work cooperatively in a group setting. Students were made aware of what appropriate behavior looked like, but did not always make appropriate choices in conflict situations.

The researchers recommend that social skills need to be introduced, taught and reviewed daily throughout the entire school year to enhance student interaction. The more exposure and practice the students have with these skills, the more positively it will influence their lives.

The researchers believe that teaching these lessons on a daily basis, as opposed to once a week, would further increase positive resolution strategies. The researchers also suggest making age appropriate modifications to lesson plans to better suit different grade levels of students. Appropriate behavior needs to be taught and modeled, then re-taught and practiced to make a difference in our student's lives.

In conclusion this research project had a positive effect on all of the students, although not to the degree of expectation on the part of the participating researchers. These researchers will use this type of modeled and practiced positive behavior in the future. This intervention is highly recommended by these researchers for further study.

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Appendix A

TEACHER OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

DATE _____

Negative

b = bulling
nc = name calling
t = teasing
tt = tattling
pc = physical contact

Positive

sn = state name
ht = happy talk/positive pieces
c = communicates what they want
ef = expresses feelings

#	Name	Negative				Positive			
1									
2									
3									
4									
5									
6									
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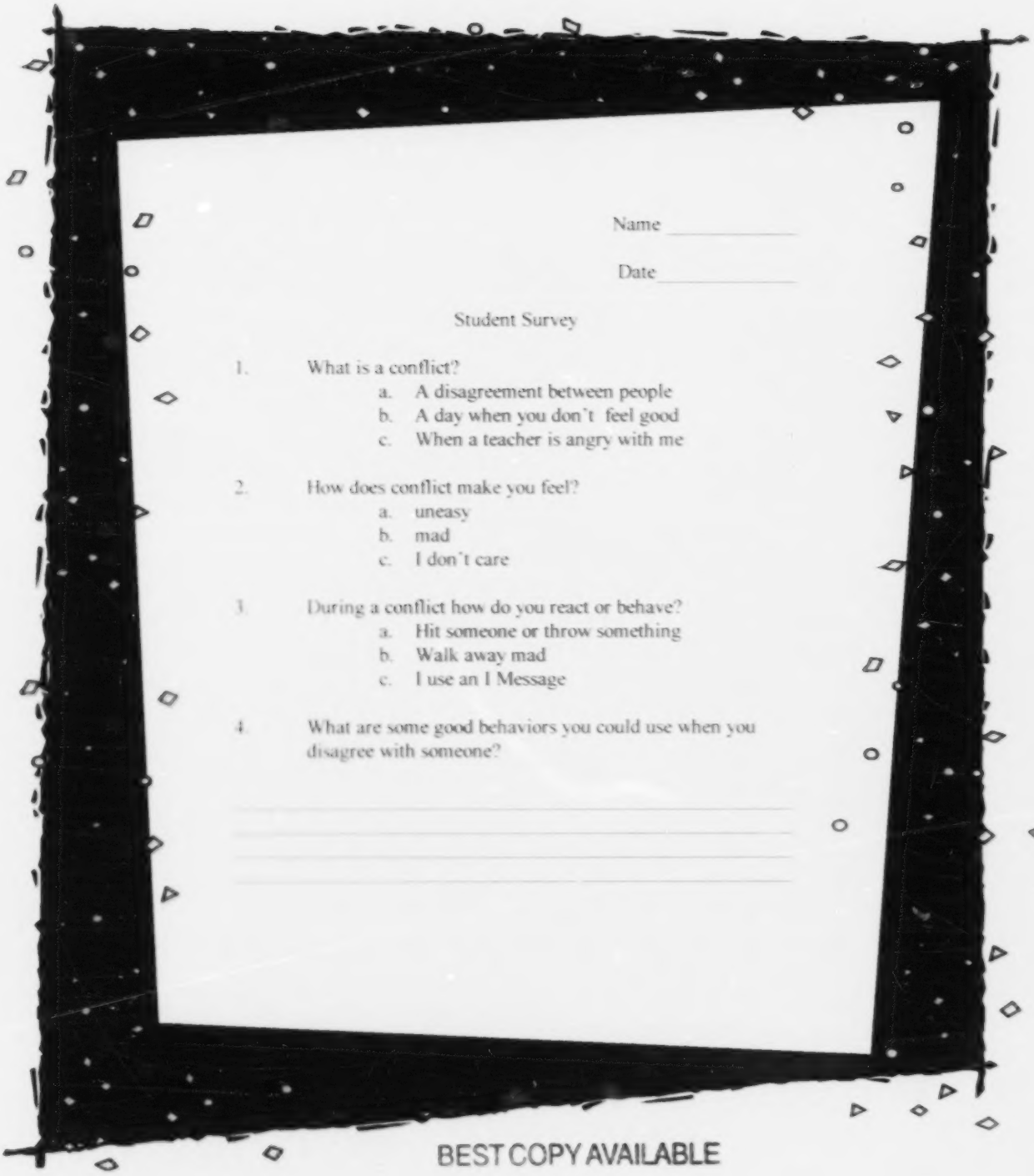
Appendix B

Student Survey



Name _____

Date _____

Student Survey

1. What is a conflict?
   a. A disagreement between people
   b. A day when you don't feel good
   c. When a teacher is angry with me

2. How does conflict make you feel?
   a. uneasy
   b. mad
   c. I don't care

3. During a conflict how do you react or behave?
   a. Hit someone or throw something
   b. Walk away mad
   c. I use an I Message

4. What are some good behaviors you could use when you disagree with someone?

_____

_____

_____

_____

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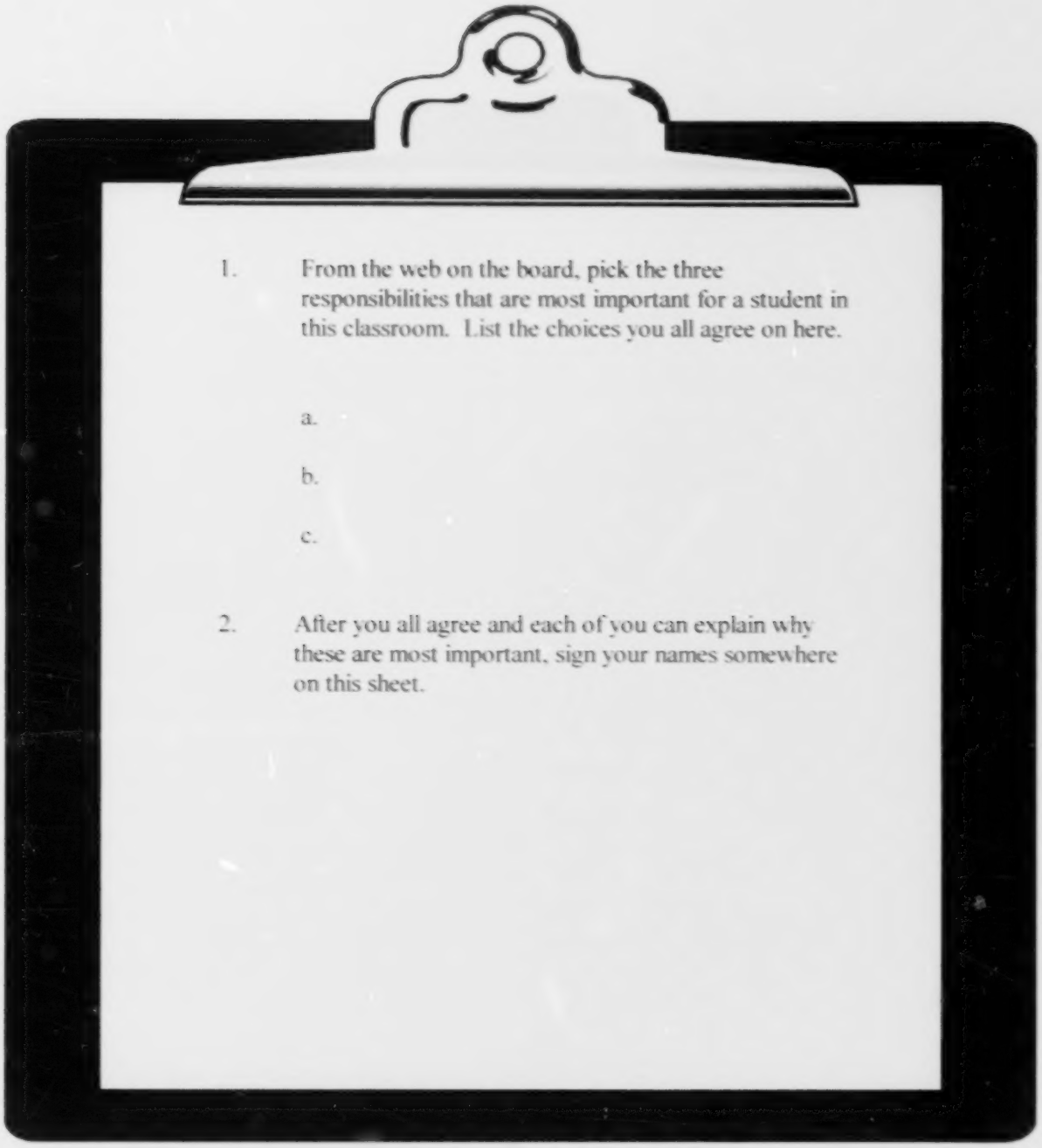
Appendix C

Responsibility Worksheet



1. From the web on the board, pick the three responsibilities that are most important for a student in this classroom. List the choices you all agree on here.

   a.

   b.

   c.

2. After you all agree and each of you can explain why these are most important, sign your names somewhere on this sheet.

Appendix D

Conflict Identification

Purpose: *Students will identify conflicts in everyday situations.*

Materials: *Markers*
Index Cards
Conflict resolution brainstorm poster from conflict pantomime activity

Procedure: *Students will work with a partner to create a real life conflict situation. Next they will write the situation on an index card to use in a future role playing activity.*

Transfer: *Students will recognize a problem as conflict when it occurs in their everyday life.*

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Appendix E

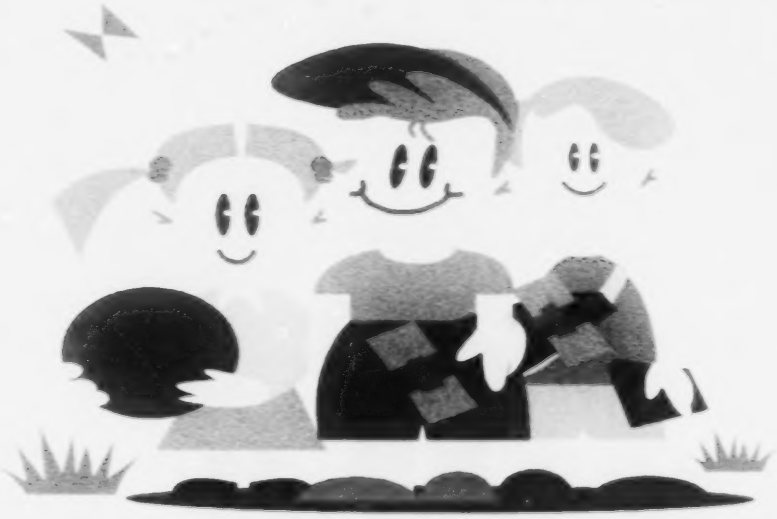
Conflict Resolution

Purpose: *To identify alternative strategies for solving conflict*

Materials: *Tag Board*
Assignment Sheet 8
Markers

Procedure: *As a class, have students brainstorm ways for solving conflict.. The teacher will introduce various strategies as conflict resolution. Examples are: using I Messages, stating what you want, compromising, talking through the situation and anger management.*

Transfer: *Students will recognize and attempt to solve conflicts in everyday situations initiated within themselves.*



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Appendix F

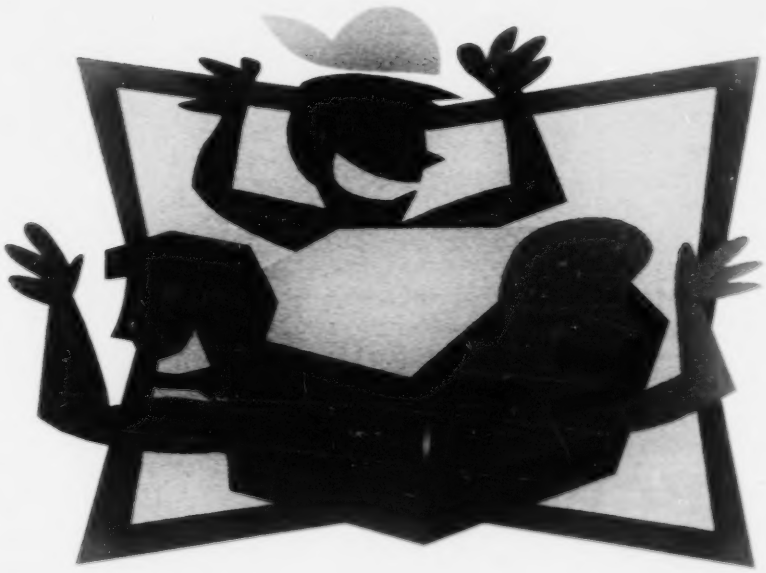
Conflict Pantomime

Purpose: *Students will practice using I Messages and other conflict resolution strategies in real life situations.*

Materials: *Student generated conflicts on index cards*
Conflict resolution strategies poster

Procedure: *In groups of two or three, students will act out peer generated conflict situations and provide a strategy for solving the problem.*

Transfer: *When students encounter similar situations, conflict resolution skills will be carried over.*



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